

French lesson for European social democracy

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Is European social democracy in crisis? That is the question being posed by many social democrats politicians and thinkers in the EU, following a run of unprecedented defeats for centre-left parties in national elections this year – in Greece, Belgium, and France - which have called into question the current health and sustainability of European social democracy.

This is, of course, not the first time the left has been forced onto the political defensive. The period of Thatcher/Reaganite hegemony in the 1980s shook the complacency of post-war social democracy to its political and ideological foundations, and forced a period of profound reflection on the European centre-left.

Nonetheless, following a process of modernisation undergone by many social democrat parties throughout the final quarter of the last century – which to varying extents saw them come to an accommodation with the free market economy, and an understanding of the necessity of structural reform as well as investment in and social innovation of the European social model - it was assumed the left in Europe was once again politically viable. The defeats of the past year, and less recently in Germany and Sweden as well, have caused many to question that assumption.

Inevitably, therefore, the questions being asked by many on the left are deep, probing and profound. Has the transition from an industrial to post-industrial knowledge economy undermined the traditional working class base on which social democrat parties once depended for their electoral support? Have the social and economic effects of globalization fostered a decisive shift rightwards in European electoral attitudes, in terms of increased hostility to immigration and emerging national and populist movements opposed to the further opening up of European societies? Can social democracy survive in an increasingly individualistic age, and how should it respond as a European-wide movement to these emerging new trends?

In France, where in June the Socialist party under Ségolène Royal suffered their third successive defeat in a presidential election, these questions have taken on an added urgency. Three months after Nicolas Sarkozy's victory, a meeting of French and European centre-left reformers, including Policy Network's honorary chair Peter Mandelson and board member Anthony Giddens, was convened in Paris to discuss the lessons of the election and its wider significance for the European left. Brought together by the [Les Graques initiative](#), the other participants included the former French prime minister and leader of the Socialist party, Michel Rocard; the leader of the newly formed Democratic party in Italy, Walter Veltroni; and Francois Chèreque, leader of the French trade union CFTD.

In his opening presentation, the originator of the third way Anthony Giddens addressed himself to what he saw as the defining dynamic of political success for parties on both the left and right: the ability – or not – to change. In order to meet the challenges of the modern global age, he suggested, the left needed to adopt a stance of permanent revisionism, an idea that will be familiar to readers of Giddens's most recent book, [Over To You, Mr Brown](#).

The need for constant revisionism stemmed from three related factors, Giddens argued. First, globalization: which encompassed technology, politics and society as well as economics, and made 'cosmopolitanism the future of our societies'. Second, the development of the service economy produced by technical change in industry had 'eliminated the class struggle as such'. Third, the rise of individualism had changed the relationship between politicians and the public and made a new form of 'lifestyle politics' essential.

While Giddens saw the challenge for the French left as ultimately one of political orientation, however, others pointed to underlying sociological trends behind the defeat of the PS. Brice Teinturier of the polling agency SOFRES suggested that the results of the French election were underpinned by a negative attitude to globalization on behalf of the French electorate, which, he said, reflected a form of 'social pessimism'. By contrast, the demographer Herve Le Bras noted that very few people above 65 had voted for the Socialist candidate Royal, which was worrying for the PS given France's long-term demographic forecasts.

However, echoing Giddens, the PS executive member and historian of the left, Alain Bergounioux, argued that, while the biggest problem the PS faced in electoral terms was the relative loss of the working class vote, its defeat in the presidential election was ultimately 'not a doctrinal failure but a political failure'. Similarly, Yolande Briand of the CFDT suggested that the working poor had rejected proposals for 'pure assistance' made by the PS during the campaign, and that the key political centre-ground to be won now was on the issue of 'flexicurity'.

So how can the PS put itself back on the road to electability? Attempting to draw lessons for the PS from the experience of the Labour party in Britain in the 1980s and 90s, Policy Network's honorary chair Peter Mandelson was blunt: 'I would have to be honest: you are not yet internally at the stage of beginning to design your political project or of finding the political personnel and leadership to build a new paradigm or coalition as Labour did in the 1990s.'

Another group that is attempting to map out a possible way forward for the French left is [Les Progressistes](#), a forum for progressive debate among those who identify with the left in France, but not necessarily with the current leadership and orientation of the PS. The group was founded by Eric Besson, a former chief economic adviser for the PS who resigned from the party during this year's French presidential campaign, and who spoke at a recent Policy Network [seminar](#) on labour market reform.

Underlying their analysis of the Socialist's defeat is the failure of the PS to address the need for comprehensive reform of the 'French model' of welfare provision. 'Our struggle should be placed within the framework of globalization rather than against it,' the group's manifesto states. 'This entails the implementation of policies that aim to improve our competitiveness in order to preserve our strong welfare system.'

Such sentiments, of course, will be familiar to those on the centre-left in Britain, who witnessed in the 1980s and 1990s the long and painful process of modernization of the Labour party, now enjoying its 10th successive year in government. Indeed, with social democratic parties in power in Italy, Spain, Portugal, Hungary, Austria, and Bulgaria, as well as in Germany and the Netherlands as junior partners, it is not all bad news for European social democracy. The foundation of the New Democratic Party in Italy to establish itself as a modern centre-left force in Europe, could be seen as a further nascent sign of revival.

So the electoral fortunes of Europe's centre left shouldn't be written off just yet – if nothing else, social democracy as a political philosophy is characterized by its ability to adapt to changing political and social circumstances ('a practice in search of a philosophy' in the words of the European post-war historian Tony Judt). One thing, however, ought to be clear: without a farsighted analysis of the underlying social and economic transformations shaping European societies, and an effective political and policy response to meet these new challenges, electoral victory will continue to elude the majority of European centre-left parties.